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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

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Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 31 of General Assembly resolution 54/189 A of 17 December 1999, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-fourth session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of my second quarterly report, of 16 June 2000 (A/54/918-S/2000/581), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. Recent developments in Afghanistan

A. Activities of the Secretary-General, his Personal Representative and the Special Mission

2. During my brief visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran in mid-June in connection with Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, I discussed, among other subjects, the situation in Afghanistan with the President, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kamal Kharrazi. Both noted with appreciation the opening of the Mission's liaison office in Tehran and reiterated their country's commitment to solving the issue of Afghanistan through political means. They also expressed their intention, in cooperation with other members of the Committee on Afghanistan of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), to continue OIC efforts on Afghanistan, and welcomed the participation of my Personal Representative in the OIC-sponsored talks with the warring factions, held at Jeddah in March and May 2000.

3. During the period under review, my Personal Representative for Afghanistan and Head of the Mission, Francesc Vendrell, has continued his contacts with the two Afghan warring sides and other Afghans, as well as with the Governments of the region. On 5 September he was received in Kandahar by the head of the Taliban movement, Mullah Mohammad Omar. He also held a separate meeting on that occasion with the Taliban Foreign Minister, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil, with whom he had held previous rounds of talks in Kandahar on 24 June and in Kabul on 27 July. My Personal Representative also travelled to Dushanbe on 24 June for discussions with the Commander of the

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United Front, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and to Faizabad on 29 July to meet the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani. On 1 August he met in Tashkent, in the course of a visit to Uzbekistan, with Acting Foreign Minister Abdullah. He has also maintained contact with other United Front leaders, including Mohammad Ismail Khan, former Governor of Herat, and General Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the Jumbeish-e-Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan.

4. My Personal Representative's discussions have dealt with ways of developing a dialogue between the two belligerents, the renewal of fighting despite the Security Council's repeated demand for a cessation of hostilities, the allegations by the Russian Federation and several Central Asian States regarding the Taliban's support for armed elements within their respective territories, the continued presence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, and issues related to human rights and the employment of Afghan female staff by United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations.

5. Most of these issues also figured in a new round of talks undertaken from late July to mid-August by my Personal Representative with leaders of the countries surrounding Afghanistan, including the President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, and the Chief Executive of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, as well as the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, Talbak Nazarov; Turkmenistan, Batyr Atayevich Berdyev; Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov; and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kamal Kharrazi, and other senior officials of those countries. All Governments concerned acknowledged the United Nations central role in restoring peace to Afghanistan and expressed their full support for the efforts pursued by me and by my Personal Representative in this regard.

6. During this period my Personal Representative also met in Islamabad with two separate delegations dispatched to Pakistan and to Afghanistan by former King Muhammad Zahir Shah, in the context of his proposal to convene a *loya jirga* or traditional grand assembly. The first of those delegations, led by the former Afghan Foreign Minister, Hidayat Amin Arsala, visited Islamabad in the third week of July and was received by the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Abdul Sattar. The second delegation, headed by the Private Secretary to the former King, Zalmai Rassoul, was in Kandahar from 8 to 10 August and held meetings with the Governor of Kandahar, Mullah Hassan Rahmani, and the Taliban Foreign Minister. The former King had previously sent delegations to France, Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and intends to dispatch representatives in the coming weeks to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Central Asian republics, the Russian Federation and Saudi Arabia, as well as to the United Front.

Activities of the Civil Affairs Unit

7. The presence of the Mission's Civil Affairs Unit in Afghanistan has been further consolidated during this period. The Unit is now permanently deployed in Fayzabad, Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar as well as Kabul. Civil Affairs Officers have also paid visits to the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and to the central region of Hazarajat pending the opening of Civil Affairs Unit offices.

8. The Civil Affairs Officers have continued to engage in a dialogue on political and human rights issues with high-ranking representatives of the local and regional authorities of both Afghan sides, as well as with the judiciary, the media and elements of civil society such as women's and youth groups, religious leaders and councils of elders (*shuras*).

B. Other political developments

Afghanistan

9. On 5 August, seven Afghan employees of the United Nations-supported mine awareness programme were killed by an unidentified armed band in western Afghanistan near the Sabzak pass while travelling on the road linking the western provinces of Badghis and Herat. The Taliban and the United Front traded accusations as to who was responsible for the crime. I expressed my shock at the depth of the violence of this unwarranted attack on humanitarian personnel and appealed to the Taliban authorities to track down the gunmen and bring them to justice. At the beginning of September, the Taliban announced the apprehension of one of the presumed perpetrators.

10. A series of bomb explosions have rocked Kabul and Jalalabad since July, three of them against Pakistani diplomatic premises. Fortunately, those three explosions caused only material damage. Other explosions in Kabul on 22 July and 3 September,

however, each claimed one life and caused several injuries. These events, which led to the dismissal of the Taliban's security chief of Kabul, were blamed by the Taliban on the United Front, which for its part denied responsibility. The Taliban later reported the arrest of two suspects allegedly linked to the United Front.

11. On 16 July, a former commander of the Mujaheddin, Abdul Qahar Shariati, known in diplomatic circles in Pakistan for his attempts to build up a Pashtun alternative to the Taliban, was arrested in Peshawar. Reports have since emerged of the detention and harassment of his supporters inside Afghanistan, and of supporters of the former King.

12. Meanwhile, one of the former prominent Mujaheddin leaders, Maulawi Muhammad Yunus Khalis, lately known as sympathetic to the Taliban, acknowledged the pivotal role of Zahir Shah and voiced his support for a *loya jirga*, describing it as the only solution to Afghanistan's problems.

13. On 25 July, the Taliban arrested Mohammad Bashir Baghlani, the Governor of Baghlan Province and one of the Taliban's key allies, at Pul-e Khumri, on charges that he had established secret contacts with the opposition. The arrest triggered clashes between the Taliban and the United Front. Baghlani was later transferred to Kandahar prison and his forces were neutralized. Shortly afterwards, Abdullah Jan Wahidi, the former Governor of Laghman Province, who had announced his alliance with the Taliban in a publicized ceremony in late April, defected back to the United Front. Late in August, the Governor of the central province of Bamyan, Maulawi Islam, parted ways with the Taliban after developing differences with them.

14. While the province of Badakhshan, located in the north-east of the country and controlled mainly by the Islamic State of Afghanistan, has mainly escaped becoming a battlefield between the Taliban and the United Front, there have been reports since mid-July of armed confrontations among several local United Front commanders in areas adjacent to Faizabad, the capital of the province.

15. On 22 August, the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, announced a periodic reshuffle of his Government, replacing the Ministers of Planning and High Education as well as the Mayor of Kabul, and appointing a new ambassador to Pakistan.

16. In a recent interview, the Taliban supreme leader reiterated that there would be no change in the movement's position regarding Osama bin Laden unless proof was provided linking him to specific terrorist acts. In the Taliban's view, the material on Osama bin Laden handed over to them by the United States of America some time ago did not constitute such evidence. The movement, reiterating its opposition to terrorism, reacted strongly to a Russian Federation-United States high-level working group meeting on Afghanistan held early in August and warned that such cooperation would negatively affect the situation in the region. On 16 August, the Taliban Foreign Ministry reiterated that the territory of Afghanistan would not be used to carry out attacks against other nations.

17. The process towards the comprehensive exchange of prisoners of war agreed in May by the two warring sides at the OIC meeting at Jeddah was interrupted by the fighting that broke out early in July. However, both sides have continued to informally exchange smaller groups of prisoners of war. Even if efforts towards a comprehensive exchange are resumed after the current fighting dies down, obstacles are likely to persist in connection with differing interpretations by the two sides of the commitments they entered into during the second round of indirect talks held at Jeddah.

18. Afghanistan's central region of Hazarajat, populated mainly by the ethnic and religious minority of the Shia Hazaras, is more negatively affected than most other areas of the country both by the ongoing war and by poor social and economic conditions, including the drought. It is controlled for the most part by indigenous factions formally allied with the Taliban; these factions, however, mistrust each other deeply. Non-Hazarajat Taliban forces are deployed there in order to maintain tight control over them and to exert heavy pressure on the local population, inter alia, by restricting their freedom to practise their religious beliefs. The problems are aggravated by sometimes violent land disputes between armed Pashtun nomads from outside the area, strong supporters of the Taliban, and local inhabitants. Aggravated by the drought, the conflicts throughout the summer became so explosive that the central Taliban authorities had to step in to negotiate, with only limited success.

Other developments

19. On 5 July, a summit meeting in Dushanbe of the "Shanghai Five" group (now renamed the "Shanghai Forum" with the addition of Uzbekistan), comprising China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Tajikistan, called for an end to the Afghan conflict, expressed concern over tensions in Afghanistan and discussed means of countering terrorism originating from that country. The Taliban immediately denied that it was supporting terrorist or separatist movements within the territories of the Forum's member States. In the aftermath of infiltration of armed groups into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan early in August, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan convened a summit meeting at Bishkek on 20 August to address the security issues which they believed had originated in Afghanistan.

20. In the course of his visit to Pakistan late in July, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Tang Jiaxuan, called for the formation of a new coalition government in Afghanistan, acceptable to all parties and endorsed by the international community. It was also reported that the Chinese delegation voiced China's concern regarding the infiltration of Islamic separatist activists into its western territory from Afghanistan. Responding to these concerns the Taliban's Ambassador to Pakistan assured China that Afghan territory would not be used against Beijing.

21. The Interior Minister of Pakistan, Moinuddin Haider, announced that his Government had handed over a list of 18 camps where Pakistani militants were allegedly receiving military training, demanding that the Taliban shut them down. Furthermore, Pakistan had demanded that the Taliban extradite those suspected of terrorist activities in Pakistan. There are indications that the Taliban have requested proof to back those charges, as well as a reciprocal agreement whereby Pakistan would in turn hand over opposition figures to the Taliban.

22. Since early August, militant Uzbek dissidents have infiltrated Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, apparently through Tajikistan, clashing with the security forces of those countries. The Governments of these Central Asian republics, and the Russian Federation, have charged that the insurgents emanate from Taliban-controlled areas in Afghanistan, where they have allegedly received shelter, training and logistical support for their operations. On 16 August the Taliban Foreign Ministry issued a statement dismissing those charges.

23. On 29 August in Kandahar, Mullah Omar received the Special Adviser to the President of Turkmenistan on Afghan affairs, Boris Sheikhmuradov, who had earlier visited the Islamic Republic of Iran. Mr. Sheikhmuradov's tour was reported to have focused on a number of national and regional issues, including talks with the United Front and the possibility of a long-term ceasefire. After visiting Kabul, Mr. Sheikhmuradov went to Islamabad, where he held discussions with the Chief Executive and the Minister for Foreign Affairs; he subsequently met Commander Massoud in Dushanbe.

C. Military situation

24. The belligerents' long preparations for a major offensive culminated, in July and August, in two rounds of intense fighting. In the first round in the Shomali area north of Kabul, the Taliban suffered heavy losses but gained no ground. These events were generally regarded as a severe setback for the Taliban and a victory, even if temporary, for the United Front. However, the offensive launched by the Taliban on 28 July in the provinces of Baghlan and Takhar resulted in their achieving two central military aims, the capture of the subdistrict of Bangi on 6 August, thereby cutting a major United Front supply line to the Panjshir Valley, and the fall on 6 September of Taloqan, a United Front stronghold and the last large town under its control. The flow of weapons and other war matériel into Afghanistan continues.

Offensive north of Kabul

25. On 1 July the Taliban launched an extensive attack, involving 5,000 to 7,000 fighters, in five directions north of Kabul, concentrating on Bagram Airport with minor activity in other Shomali areas and in the district of Nejrab, further east. The United Front forces were not taken by surprise, having earlier engaged the Taliban with artillery fire and rockets. Initial gains by the Taliban on the ground were reversed, and by 2 July the fighting had by and large subsided. On 9 July the Taliban attacked United Front positions south of Charikar town to the north of Kabul. They again initially took some ground, which later in the day was recaptured by the United Front.

26. Both sides sustained heavy losses in the hostilities of 1 and 9 July, with an estimated 200 to 400 killed and 500 to 650 wounded, around 75 per cent of these losses accruing to the Taliban. United Front losses stemmed mainly from civilian casualties as a result of Taliban air strikes. The outcome of the fighting was in general regarded as a severe setback to the Taliban.

Baghlan/Takhar campaign

27. From mid-July the Taliban started preparations for a new offensive, this time in the northern province of Baghlan, bringing in 8,000 to 10,000 fighters, including non-Afghan elements, mainly from religious schools in Pakistan and other sources. The United Front defence was least strong in Baghlan, as the United Front leadership had pinned their hopes on the possible about-face of the top local commander in the province, Bashir Baghlani. The United Front's hopes were dashed when Baghlani was arrested by the Taliban on 25 July.

28. On 28 July the Taliban launched the offensive against the United Front's front lines west of Nahrin town, quickly advancing about 25 kilometres. Between 29 July and 6 August they captured the towns of Nahrin and Burka in Baghlan Province, as well as Eskamesh and Bangi in neighbouring Takhar Province, the latter being of decisive importance for the United Front's defence of Taloqan.

29. After the Taliban succeeded in advancing from Bangi to as close as 5 to 8 kilometres from Taloqan on 7 August, for almost a month the battle over Taloqan flowed back and forth in numerous attacks and counter-attacks west, north-west and south of the town. The Taliban forces were supported by air assaults, but the United Front's extensive minefields proved to be the main obstacle, preventing the Taliban from progressing further on the ground. On 4 September the Taliban, reinforced by fresh units and supported by an increased number of tanks, artillery fire and air assaults, launched a vigorous attack on Taloqan from four directions, resulting in the capture of the town in the early hours of 6 September. The fall of Taloqan is a severe blow to the United Front. Both sides sustained heavy losses in the Baghlan/Takhar campaign. The civilian population, for the most part living in United Front-controlled areas, also suffered casualties as a result of Taliban air attacks and artillery shelling.

D. Activities in New York

30. Taking advantage of the presence of Ministers for Foreign Affairs in New York for the General Assembly session, I decided to convene a meeting of the "six plus two" informal group on 15 September at the level of Foreign Ministers. The meeting, the second of its kind following the one in September 1998, was attended by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Tang Jiaxuan; the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kamal Kharrazi; the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Abdul Sattar; the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Igor S. Ivanov; the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Madeleine Albright; and the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdusamat A. Khaydarov, as well as the Permanent Representatives of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to the United Nations. Following my opening statement, my Personal Representative briefed the group on the latest developments on the ground and on his peacemaking efforts.

31. In their concluding statement (see annex to the present report), the participants expressed grave concern about the intensification of fighting in Afghanistan and its negative humanitarian consequences. They emphasized that there could be no military solution to the Afghan conflict and again called upon the warring parties to agree to a ceasefire and enter into negotiations aimed at bringing about a political solution to the conflict. In this regard, they requested the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to enter into contact with all relevant Afghan parties and report back to the group on the outcome of his contacts by 1 November 2000.

III. Humanitarian activities and human rights

A. Humanitarian situation

32. Humanitarian assistance continues to be provided in a volatile context. The recent murder of seven Afghan workers of the United Nations-supported mine awareness programme by an unidentified armed band in western Afghanistan (see para. 9) is a tragic confirmation of the risks taken by humanitarian personnel every day.

33. The crop assessment team of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) predicted earlier this year a shortfall in production of 2.3 million tons of cereal (66 per cent or two thirds of consumption requirements). This deficit follows on the heels of the 1999/2000 drought, which last year's assessment team rated as the worst in 40 years. Losses this year, however, are twice as great as last year.

34. FAO estimates that 300,000 tons of wheat seed is planted annually in Afghanistan. This year there is an estimated minimum deficit of 60,000 tons of seed as a result of either widespread production failure, forced consumption for food or poorly formed grains that will not germinate. Planting takes place either in the winter (October/November) or the spring (March/April). Currently there is no possibility of mobilizing more than 6,000 tons of additional seed, according to FAO. Without seed it is estimated that 400,000 farmers will miss the winter planting season.

35. In many areas the selling off of livestock to compensate for losses in production began last year. This occurred most prominently in the northern and southern regions where many households began the 2000/2001 harvest cycle with herd sizes down by as much as 50-75 per cent. It is anticipated that most households in northern, southern and western parts of the country will completely deplete their herds some time within the next six months. This will leave families without breeding stock and plough animals, representing the loss of virtually all productive assets.

36. The first large-scale movement of families from drought-affected areas has begun. Up to 1,800 families have reached Herat, the main urban centre in the west, from remote districts in Ghor, Badghis and Faryab Provinces. These families, many of them destitute, are now being accommodated in disused camps for internally displaced persons on the edge of the city. According to the World Health Organization, nutritional assessments are already cause for concern, as are the worsening mortality rates and sanitation situation. The place of origin of the internally displaced persons is known to be one of the areas most severely affected by drought; however, security-related problems as well as exceptional logistical challenges hamper relief efforts to stabilize the area. WFP is assisting acutely malnourished internally displaced persons. There is a fear that the scale of the Ghor-Herat migration has the potential to increase dramatically.

37. A second region, Dari Suf in southern Samangan, is also already experiencing high levels of famine-related distress. Here the first deaths attributable to malnutrition (verified by a nutritional survey) have already occurred. Military forces are preventing families from migrating to areas where they could expect to receive support, while food supplies to them are being blocked. After many weeks of negotiation and delay the United Nations received permission from Taliban authorities to move food into the area.

38. While the response of the international community to the United Nations drought appeal has been encouraging in terms of food, inadequate resources have been pledged for other relief activities. The current fighting in northern Afghanistan, combined with the drought-related needs of hundreds of thousands of people, is putting the humanitarian community under considerable pressure. The significant lack of resources often means that humanitarian agencies cannot respond to brutal, life-threatening needs. Tens of thousands of new internally displaced persons have already been identified following recent fighting. The fall of Taloqan and other northern cities is one major concern, while internally displaced persons in the Panjshir Valley continue to lack support. The lack of resources is often compounded by difficulties in gaining access for humanitarian agencies.

Refugees

39. Despite the severe drought in most parts of Afghanistan as well as a continuation of armed hostilities, and contrary to the advice of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan continue to opt for voluntary repatriation to their places of origin in Afghanistan. While some refugees return because of improved security conditions, many are forced to return because of poor conditions and a lack of donor resources in their countries of asylum.

40. The Joint Programme of UNHCR and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran continued to provide large numbers of undocumented Afghans in that country with the option of voluntarily returning with UNHCR assistance to their places of origin in Afghanistan or of applying for continued protection at one of seven screening centres. Since the beginning of the programme on 8 April, a total of 82,001 Afghans

have been assisted to return to Afghanistan in 61 convoys. The voluntary repatriation is expected to continue at the current volume of 4,500 returnees per week until the end of the Joint Programme early in October 2000. Additionally, 21,422 cases (approximately 107,000 persons) seeking continued protection in the Islamic Republic of Iran have been interviewed by joint screening teams. Of those interviewed, 5,724 cases have been accepted and granted temporary permission to remain in the Islamic Republic of Iran and 9,359 cases rejected, while 6,339 cases are pending a decision.

41. The deteriorating situation and the increasing number of internally displaced persons resulting from drought and war in Afghanistan is adding to the concern about the situation of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the end of the Joint Programme. Recent legislation adopted by the Majlis in the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the stay of foreigners in the country has increased this concern. A follow-up formula to the Joint Programme, in accordance with international standards, is needed to ensure that Afghans are not faced with the hardships of forcible return and a situation in which they are unable to sustain their lives in either the Islamic Republic of Iran or Afghanistan.

42. UNHCR continues to provide in-country transportation for returnees from the Islamic Republic of Iran to places of return. While many of the needs for effective reintegration are being addressed, most remain unmet given the serious funding limitations and the non-availability of medium- to long-term assistance. This situation renders voluntary repatriation a durable solution only for those who own land that produces crops or those who have the means to engage in the limited market of productive labour.

Narcotic drugs

43. Preliminary results of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) annual opium poppy survey in Afghanistan indicate a roughly 10 per cent decrease in opium cultivation in 2000 as compared to 1999, when poppy cultivation reached a new record level of over 90,000 hectares. It is encouraging to note that there was a reduction of around 50 per cent in Kandahar Province, including three of the Programme's target districts, where alternative development assistance has been provided since 1997. Opium poppy cultivation has also declined in some of the districts in Helmand and Nangarhar Provinces, though this decrease was offset by increases in other districts and provinces.

44. The opium harvest is expected to be significantly lower than last year's totals because of the drought. However, exceptions are noted in the provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar, the two major opium poppy cultivating provinces, representing 76 per cent of the opium poppy area, where it appears that opium poppy was given priority over other crops in the allocation of scarce irrigation water, and where a high level of opium production could be sustained. The poor opium harvest will leave many farmers who took out a loan or who were leasing land from landlords in a desperate position. Poverty is one of the driving forces behind opium production. However, the UNDCP programme to provide alternative livelihoods is significantly under-funded, a failure which could be seen as significantly short-sighted for countries attempting to combat drug production.

45. On 27 July 2000, the Taliban supreme leader issued a decree imposing for the first time a total ban on opium poppy cultivation in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The promulgation of this decree is an encouraging step, particularly in the context of the 1997 ban on the production of illicit drugs, excluding opium. However, the Taliban's efforts to translate the decree into a measurable reduction of opium poppy cultivation will need to be closely monitored as from this year's poppy planting season.

B. Human rights

46. Recent offensives, which once again have civilians on the run, are a reminder that the parties to the conflict abuse human rights in Afghanistan. Each day, front-line communities are subjected to indiscriminate bombing and the use of landmines. There are also regular reports of the deliberate destruction of homes and assets, including water systems, food, and animals essential for survival. Summary executions and arbitrary detention continue to be a feature of the Afghan conflict. Away from the front line, Afghans continue to be denied fundamental rights such as the right to food, shelter, health, and therefore to the right to life. Drought and conflict result in the worsening of already high infant and maternal mortality rates.

47. The recent firman (decree of law) banning the employment of Afghan women in United Nations and non-governmental organization programmes except in the health sector affects several thousand Afghan women who are currently working through the assistance community in the country. It represents a gross violation of the right of Afghan women to employment. Furthermore, the division of gender roles in Afghanistan creates a situation where only women programmers can reach women beneficiaries. It is therefore a prerequisite for all assistance programmes targeting women to employ, together with international female staff, large numbers of Afghan women to help facilitate and monitor these programmes. The ban on the employment of Afghan women, if implemented, will considerably reduce the capacity of the assistance community to reach female target groups in Afghanistan.

48. The most serious outcome of the ban to date was the forced closure of the WFP-supported bakeries operated by women. However, in response to pressure from Kabul's population, the bakeries were reopened after 24 hours. The firman, however, remains in place. Negotiations between the United Nations and the Taliban authorities over issues relating to female employment continue in Kabul and Kandahar.

49. Afghan women and girls also continue to be denied their fundamental rights in terms of access to an acceptable standard of medical care and basic education and are restricted in their ability to earn a living. Despite some limited improvements, the situation remains far from satisfactory.

50. The Taliban authorities have recently advised the United Nations that they have declined the request of the Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan, Kamal Hossain, to visit the country. Such lack of cooperation with international human rights mechanisms is at odds with the stated commitment of the Taliban to human rights.

IV. Observations

51. It is hard not to be repetitive when commenting on the continuing Afghan tragedy. Summer has come, and with it the regular seasonal offensive, once again flouting the express demands of the Security Council to the warring sides, particularly the Taliban, to desist from fighting. With the first winter snows unlikely to fall before mid-October, it is too early to predict whether any significant territorial gains will have been achieved by then. What is all too obvious is that any gains on the battlefield will not bring about an end to the Afghan conflict, which cries out for a comprehensive political solution in keeping with the aspirations of the Afghan people and the legitimate concerns of the international community.

52. The current drought, the worst for over 30 years, is having a devastating effect on the population of Afghanistan, particularly in the rural areas, where the index of vulnerability is already extremely high. The question is how much longer the Afghan people will be able to withstand the accumulated effects of drought and warfare, let alone cope with any possible further economic blows. I appeal to the donor community to respond generously to requests for support.

53. The recent Taliban decree imposing for the first time a total ban on opium poppy cultivation in their territory is an encouraging development that deserves a positive response. I also take positive note of the ability of the Mission's Civil Affairs Unit to function inside Afghanistan. The regional action plan on drugs that has been worked out by the "six plus two" is a useful step towards achieving political cohesion among its members, which has so far been conspicuously missing.

54. It is unfortunate, however, that positive developments are offset by other actions such as the edict against the employment of Afghan women and the unwillingness to receive the Special Rapporteur.

55. Prior to the onset of the fighting, there had been signs that the two sides might consider embarking upon some kind of dialogue under the auspices of the United Nations. It is to be hoped that this may still be the case when the current round of fighting ends. While other international organizations and third countries can and should play a useful role in the search for peace, it is desirable that any initiative be undertaken in close coordination with, and under the umbrella of, the United Nations, whose central role in the settlement of the conflict has repeatedly been recognized by the Security Council and the General Assembly as well as by countries in the region.

56. I cannot but express an element of disappointment that there has been no significant shift as yet in the well-known positions of those countries that have interests in and influence on Afghanistan. It

is of the utmost importance for the settlement of the Afghan conflict that they should find a common approach. I will endeavour, through various avenues, to seek ways of achieving such a consensus. The recent incursions by Islamic militants into the territory of Central Asian countries highlight once again the danger of further spread of the conflict, and the need for a comprehensive rather than a piecemeal approach to the Afghan crisis.

Annex

Concluding statement of the high-level meeting of the "six plus two" group, held at United Nations Headquarters on 15 September 2000

Foreign Ministers and other senior representatives of the "six plus two" group met on 15 September 2000 at United Nations Headquarters to discuss the current situation in Afghanistan.

The heads of the delegations to the meeting, which was chaired by the Secretary-General, were: Tang Jiaxuan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, China; Kamal Kharrazi, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran; Abdul Sattar, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pakistan; Igor S. Ivanov, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation; Rashid Alimov, Permanent Representative of Tajikistan to the United Nations; Aksoltan T. Ataeva, Permanent Representative of Turkmenistan to the United Nations; Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State, United States of America; and Abdusamat A. Khaydarov, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Uzbekistan.

The members of the "six plus two" group wish to express their appreciation for the Secretary-General's initiative in convening this timely meeting.

Following an opening statement by the Secretary-General, his Personal Representative for Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, briefed the meeting on recent developments and on the peacemaking efforts of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan.

Foreign Ministers and other senior representatives of the "six plus two" group expressed grave concern about the intensification of fighting in Afghanistan and its negative humanitarian consequences. They emphasized that there could be no military solution to the Afghan conflict and again called upon the warring parties to agree to a ceasefire and enter into negotiations aimed at bringing about a political solution to the conflict. In this regard, the "six plus two" requested the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to enter into contact with all relevant Afghan parties and report back to the group on the outcome of his contacts by 1 November 2000.

The signatories of the Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan (A/54/174-S/1999/812, annex) reaffirmed the principles contained in that Declaration.

The members of the "six plus two" group reiterated their support for the central role of the United Nations in the peaceful solution of the Afghan conflict and for the ongoing efforts of the Secretary-General and his Personal Representative as well as other efforts in support of United Nations activities to achieve a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan.

The members of the "six plus two" group pledged to continue to work closely with and in support of the Secretary-General and his Personal Representative in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.